

“BLACK HISTORY: A LESSON IN RESILIENCY”

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Keynote Address

Commonwealth of Kentucky Black History Month Program

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It is truly an esteemed honor and privilege to have been invited today to share with you in your observance of Black History Month. I rise today to give honor to our governor, Steven L. Beshear for his courage to embrace the government of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. My prayers are ever with him as he meets the challenges that indeed lie ahead. I salute Personnel Secretary, Nikki Jackson for your leadership and willingness to serve in such a vital capacity with both intelligence and grace. I especially want to greet my beloved friend and one whom I affectionately have adopted as my little sister, Ms. Michele' E. Lawlis, Executive Director of the Office for Human Resource Planning and Diversity Initiatives, whom I have had the pleasure to know as a colleague committed to excellence and dignity in all undertakings of her life. I thank you for this invitation to speak today to this august body of state personnel who turn the wheels of our commonwealth with great precision and efficiency.

I am captivated by the theme of the occasion. Truly Black History Month gives credence to an educational emphasis that should typify every human being's quest for knowledge and wisdom each day of our lives for a lifetime. Dr. Charles J. King, Jr., a trusted friend and colleague of mine for several years and President and CEO of Project One, Inc. in Louisville is known for a most

profound expression. He says simply and yet emphatically, "Education is the greatest destroyer of poverty."

Great emphasis must be placed in Kentucky on the importance of education. We see in our statistics our struggle for reaching sufficient education attainment rates. It is also known of the need for both the development and enhancement of a dynamic and equipped workforce. With these important factors of sustained growth sometimes hanging in the balances, every moral and ethical effort should be placed in empowering all citizens of our commonwealth with the necessary tools to be released from the shackles of economic distress by the empowerment of both heads and hearts with knowledge and skills that will inspire generations yet to come.

It is important that as we talk about black history in this state that we honor and esteem greatly historically black colleges and universities that have survived tremendous winds of neglect in distant years and yet have empowered citizens of color to reach for the stars. Many times these institutions had very little funding to even afford maintenance of facilities, but yet they prevailed. They prevailed having endured the yo-yo phenomena – up one minute and down the next two minutes. Back and forth – in and out – these institutions have struggled to brave the fierce storms of racial oppression and economic depression, but even still strong tenacious leadership emerged and carried these institutions to greater heights in spite of shoestring budgets. Professors taught everything they knew with fervency and stamina regardless of limited remuneration because they believed that each human vessel they instructed must be filled and overflowing if ever they would be able to turn the tides of an oppressive society.

And yet after all such fine accomplishments, as I stand here today, our urban communities are riddled with violence, crime, homicide, and hopelessness and the only gift that can be given to socially strained and underdeveloped communities is the gift of education. For the more people know, the more choices they have to do what is right and proper for themselves and for the wellbeing of others. Such communities today have lacked the intimate connection with wise elders and teachers who take the time to share the empowered history of black fore-parents who were filled with such determination and perseverance that they would not dare be caught without

dignity, class and intellectual advancement. Black forefathers would not dare to senselessly take the lives of their cohorts because they knew that every hand was necessary – every mind was crucial – every talent must be brought to bear for the deliverance of a people held captive to slavery.

If our communities are going to be transformed today back to the value systems of life, hope, character development, teamwork and social preparedness, the centers of higher education must be not only remembered but reinforced by precious resources so that they may again reach a population of African Americans and citizens at large who need to be liberated from the bondage of broken homes, untaught values and hopeless living.

I have come to encourage the current administration of our state government and you our employed servants today with the understanding that whenever you feel that you don't know what to do, you can always refer to the history of African American people to inspire you to keep on pressing on. When you reflect upon the history of our people, a chord ought to resound within your spirit and a tingling sensation ought to rush up your spine and an inner washing of refreshment ought to flood your soul to know that any obstacle you face can be overcome. As you reflect on Black History, you do not have to look far to discover valuable lessons of resiliency. You need only to look within our own commonwealth to get the hopeful instruction you need.

I am blessed to labor each day at an institution of higher learning that bears in each heartbeat of its current existence the resiliency of the past. Simmons College of Kentucky, originally named in 1879 the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute and later known in 1882 as State University was responsible for the education of a large segment of the black masses in Kentucky. During the period of 1879 – 1930, the school experienced a number of transformations in its effort to educate Kentucky blacks. Simmons is the mother of black higher education in the state of Kentucky. Any African American who has been involved in higher education in the state – whether as a student, faculty, or administrator – is indebted to the pioneering work of Simmons University as it became known in 1918.

Rev. Elisha W. Green a formerly enslaved pastor explained, “We agreed to purchase the “Hill property,” at Frankfort, for the purpose of erecting thereon a college in order to educate our people and get a competent and well educated

ministry. We saw from our own ability, and looking at the condition of our people just from slavery, that our effort to do this was a good one." According to Green, he said, *"We old brethren just out of slavery, many of us not having had the privilege to learn, thought it a grand thing to build an educational structure upon which, when we were dead, our children would look with pride and call us "blessed."*

The 50-acre Frankfort property was purchased and the ministers devised a plan to pay off the mortgage by taxing each of the churches of what is now known as the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky annual payments of \$50 to \$100 until the debt was paid.

The vision for a school was securely in place, but the location was another tenuous matter. At some point, a decision was made to move the location of the proposed school from Frankfort to Louisville. The property in Frankfort had been paid off and the decision was made to sell the Frankfort property and purchase property in Louisville. The current property of Kentucky State University is that "Hill Property" that I have referred to. And the current property of Simmons College of Kentucky at 7th and Kentucky was where what is now known as Simmons College of Kentucky opened its doors. By the time its second president, William J. Simmons was selected a year later, the school had only two teachers, 13 students and NO OPERATING CAPITAL. The School was black owned and black operated from its beginning and has continued to be so throughout its entire history.

In 1886, Dr. William J. Simmons made a speech before the Kentucky legislature, after which, two thousand copies were printed for distribution. He was the first African American to address the state legislature. His appeal to them was to show how other states had received appropriations financially to develop state universities to educate blacks and yet Kentucky had not yet done so. With many documented illustrations, he spoke with such passion and intellect that it did indeed move the legislature to make a move. His strong appeal for promoting higher education for African Americans was so inspiring that in the very next year, dedicatory exercises were held in Frankfort for the State Normal School for Colored Persons, now known as Kentucky State University.

Both Simmons University and William J. Simmons are the impetus for the conception of Kentucky State University. In his speech at the Lexington

Emancipation celebration on January 1, 1887, he urged hearers to greater efforts, saying, *"Here in this new South the Negro shall shine in the constellation of the nations, and by his words and deeds hand down to unborn ages the glittering pages of our history. We shall in some prominent way mount the ladder of difficulties, scale the cliff of prejudices and hide our heads among the stars."*

Such a leader did indeed set the stage through prolific writing of the book, "Men of Mark" where he highlighted the achievements of blacks nationally. Simmons set the stage as he became the founder of the National Baptist Convention which has now become the largest black denomination of the Christian Faith.

Throughout the history of Simmons University you will find that there were difficult seasons. It was a struggle to just simply survive. Yet leaders continued to do their part to keep the institution going and growing. By the time World War I was in full effect, Louisville's black community had a number of well-trained professionals in the fields of religion, law and medicine. Simmons University had emerged as the college of choice for Kentucky's black middle class as Frankfort's Kentucky State Normal and Industrial institute was flourishing as an industrial institute. Both of these institutions were able to mold and shape the development of black higher education in Kentucky. By the fall of 1922, student enrollment at Simmons had swelled to over 500 students. An addition facility was built in 1924. But the building fund had failed to deliver the financial capital needed to pay for the \$80,000 construction project. Despite many efforts, the school's properties could not be saved from foreclosure. Simmons University was caught in rippling financial crisis that caused the demise of several black banks and businesses in the area. In 1930, the University of Louisville purchased the property at 7th and Kentucky streets. The property was renovated and became the Louisville Municipal College for Colored.

But did the Simmons school quit? Did it fold? Did they give up? No! They were resilient. They reorganized and became a theological institution. After a few years the school reestablished itself on 18th and Dumesnil streets, in 1935. Black clergy and others continued to be educated in that facility for another 75 years.

And the best news of resiliency is that the school continued, even while

struggling, to a time 3 years ago when it welcomed its 13th President, Rev. Dr. Kevin W. Cosby who has taken the meticulous time to bring to light the historical legacy of the school. In this time, the then facility at 18th and Dumesnil needed to be renovated. Within a year, both floors were renovated and classes were able to utilize both floors again. Simmons College of Kentucky became the new name emphasizing the return of Simmons to liberal arts education. The property at 7th and Kentucky has been once again reclaimed and renovated with exquisite excellence. On June 28, 2007, I and many others were privileged to be a part of unprecedented history.... Never before has an Historic Black College and University lost its original campus and been blessed to return to its original campus after having lost it. On June 28, 2007, Simmons College of Kentucky returned home! Now Simmons College of Kentucky owns both the 7th and Kentucky campus and the 18th and Dumesnil campus. Now Simmons College of Kentucky has an increased enrollment – a revived liberal arts emphasis – is pursuing accreditation with a leading faith-based accrediting body recognized by the United States Department of Education – has a stellar SACS accredited faculty with nearly 70% holding terminal degrees – offers GED classes to help those seeking to enter the world of higher education with the opportunity to complete their GED and continue matriculation with Simmons – has recently developed a SMART Classroom enabling the capacity for Simmons to offer distance learning worldwide – has revived its athletic program with the inception of the Simmons Panthers Basketball team.

Under Dr. Cosby's dynamic leadership, Simmons has raised nearly \$4 million dollars within his 3 year presidency and is seeking partnerships with UPS to offer education and employment opportunities to students. Simmons College of Kentucky has developed relationships with several institutions for the transferral of credits within the states and we continue to discuss new and brighter and hopeful ways of partnership to liberate the lives of Louisville's citizens in underdeveloped communities to access higher education.

So to you who labor every day for the wellbeing of our state --- to you who struggle sometimes to see the light at the end of the tunnel – to you who sometimes wonder is it worth it to go to work and deal with a state with such a high deficit – to you who may wonder about the ability of your administration to lead you and the state safely to the other side of plenteous resources – to you

who need to know that we may have fallen, but we can get back up again... I encourage you to know that to be resilient means to bounce back! Through all of the struggles, the history of Simmons College of Kentucky screams a message a hope into your heads and hearts that it is possible and even probable that every cloud will reveal a silver lining... the sun does indeed shine after the rain... and if you be faithful to your task – if you do your part – and if everyone works with one another and not against one another – and if people will be patient with themselves and with others and if you believe in the Almighty's power that is greater than yourself, we will all see Kentucky bounce back!

As I hold this tennis ball, please remember that this ball has something ON it – this ball has something IN it – this ball will know something UNDER it and this ball will reach for something ABOVE it.

This ball has the potential to bounce back even as I hold it in my hand. This ball is in my hand... my hand is ON this ball...

This represents the FORCE. There is a force – a pressure – upon you to say the least. You feel it every day. And I want to encourage every heart in here to be mindful of whose hands you are in. I chose not to place myself in the company – in the hands of people who doubt – who fear – who are timid – who are scared. If you are like me you want leadership – you want fellowship that is courageous – daring – tenacious – and forceful that expects nothing but the best that is yet to come. What is ON this ball? Force.

But that is not all... There is something IN this ball. Inside this ball rests potential - A potential with the capacity to respond. It is not without a response. This ball will respond to whatever the FORCE – whatever the pressure. I call that FAITH.

You have to believe that regardless of what FORCE you FACE, you have a FAITH that will respond in the positive direction. You have power on the inside – you have potential on the inside – you have capacity on the inside – you have courage on the inside. You can and you will respond to every FORCE that you FACE with FAITH. Without faith, you give up – without belief, you fall into a daily rut – you lack motivation – you lack inspiration. But faith comes on the basis of what you decide to listen to. Faith comes by hearing... If you listen to negativism, your response will be fueled with negativism. But if you listen to hope – if you listen to joy – if you listen to forgiveness – if you listen to

positivity, you will respond as such. And your potential that is empowered by faith will set you up to be lifted.

You have a FORCE on you – you have FAITH in you...

But then you have something under you. The force will test you to see how you will respond to the pressure. And the force will be downward thrusts and sometimes the force will be upward thrusts. But either way, you will experience down times... If the thrust is downward, you will go down. If the thrust is upward – someone says what goes up... must come down. You have to deal with your down moments. It is in these down moments that you will confront what I will call FOES. Foes are points of contact that beat against you and make you realize that you have bumped into something. There will be times when you will get beat by your foes... your opposition – your enemies. You may even work with people who mean you no good. They don't want to see you happy – they don't want you to have a joyous attitude. They don't want your smiling face. They don't want your humorous emails. They are miserable and they want you to be miserable. But let me tell you something... Your FAITH must meet your FOES. Your FAITH must respond to your FORCES. And either direction, your response and your confrontations will make you stronger – you will learn your surroundings – you will mature in your character – you will learn new things about yourself. I have learned to thank God for my FOES and thank Him for my opposition, for without such, I wouldn't know just how strong my FAITH within really is...

But then as I close, ON you is the FORCE. IN you is your FAITH. UNDER you are your FOES... But then ABOVE you is your FLIGHT. When the downward pressure on this ball forces this ball to confront its foes, the faith on the inside of this ball responds and at the very point of contact with what is under the ball --- whatever pressure that brought the ball down is responded to with double the pressure upward! The harder the force, the higher the flight! Your flight up up and away from the down times.. your flight up up and away from your foes is determined by how much determination – how much faith – how much response you have on the inside. If you are a flat personality, when you fall down, you stay down... there is nothing within you to lift you up again. But its when you believe - even though you are down, you won't stay down, you will respond to the force with strong faith – overcome your foes and take

flight! After all... today marks the fact that this year, 2008 is a LEAP YEAR! This is your year to take a leap! You will leap and you will soar! Believe it!

When you take flight, you overcome – when you overcome, your colleagues will overcome. When your colleagues overcome, your vision overcomes. When your vision overcomes, the commonwealth will overcome. And when you fly – when you soar – when you achieve, every one else will achieve and the next thing you know as you go up – Kentucky goes up. And then you can join in with the historical speech of Dr. William J. Simmons and your life will *“shine in the constellation of the nations, and by your words and your deeds you will hand down to unborn ages the glittering pages of our history. We shall in some prominent way mount the ladder of difficulties, scale the cliff of prejudices and hide our heads among the stars!”*

Thank you and may God bless you!